

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**December 5, 2010**  
**Matthew 3:1-12**  
**“Fire Talk”**

The crowds were quite large, clustered together near the banks of the Jordan River, jockeying for position so they could see the new sensation – a prophet, no less, called John the Baptizer. Most of the people had traveled twenty miles or more, a good day’s journey from Jerusalem, just to hear John for themselves. Some likely had come out of curiosity, hoping to be entertained. Others, though, came out of a hunger, a desire to find meaning and to make sense of their wounded, troubled lives. It is much the same today: some of you came to church out of curiosity or sheer habit; many of you came into this sanctuary today looking for something, hoping for a comforting word or to find peace at last. Rhetorical Question #1: What brought you to church today? Why are you here?

The crowds by the Jordan River were beginning to grow restless when John appeared and stood with his back to the water. His message was simple: *Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near*. It is easy to characterize John as an “end of the world” preacher, which to our modern ears simply means he was crazy – delusional, off his meds, telling everyone that the sun and moon will soon fall from the sky and all life will end. We characterize apocalyptic talk this way so that we can dismiss it, because as anyone can see, the sun and moon are still in the sky, and the meteorologists have assured us that the world’s end, the universe’s collapse, isn’t scheduled to happen for billions of years.

But John never preaches that the world is going to end – that God is going to flip some cosmic switch, the world is going to grind to a halt and all life will end. John, like the prophets before him, and hopefully like the preachers after him, reminds us that this reality, all we see and experience, is part of a larger reality – one shaped and nourished by God. It unfolds in chronological time yet is grounded in a spirit and love and purpose that is beyond time, one eternal and boundless in ways no words can describe. John isn’t shouting “The world is coming to an end.” In effect, John is saying, “Listen: the kingdom of God, the fullness of creation of which you’ve only been marginally aware has come near and is squeezing in around you from all directions.”

That is still our message today. John motioned to the river behind him and invited people to respond by stepping into the water and be baptized. We do the same. People come forward to be baptized, bringing children, coming as youth or of any age, to step into a thin place where heaven’s realm and earth’s reality merge together. It is a sacrament in which we invoke God in a whisper because God is so near; one in which we pour water as a caress, because it is a cleansing act of incredible love; one in which we make promises publicly, because there is no faith except that which is professed openly in words and deeds.

John's message was not that the world was ending, that an apocalypse would destroy all life. John preached that the kingdom of God was coming near and all the world would be changed – and there's a difference. God's ways, God's spirit, God's laws, God's priorities – those would be the dominant realities, as the membrane between heaven and earth would be punctured and all God's power would come rushing in, transforming everything. Think about it this way: If everything was about to be destroyed, why would it matter whether you were good or bad, wheat or chaff, a tree that bore good fruit or a tree that only produced rotten apples? If everything's destroyed, why wouldn't we all cynically say, "Let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die"? John insists that the grain is gathered into the granary and kept safe; the good trees are not cut down but are preserved. Why? Because they will continue to bear fruit.

That's why John commands us: *The Kingdom of God is near. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.* Repentance is not a comfortable Presbyterian word. It sounds more Baptist-y and Billy Graham-ish than our vocabulary of committee meetings and coffee hours, but it is actually quite Presbyterian. Repentance is a call for faithful reflection that leads to humble change. It is an honest self-inventory that says, "As the kingdom of God is right here, embracing and enfolding me, how do I understand its reality and how does my life either reflect or distort its truth?" This type of self-inventory will have some black and white answers – here you succeed, here you fail. It will also have some shades of gray, some best guesses and some "I don't know at all" answers, because we don't fully understand God's ways and God's kingdom. But by repentance, by grace, by bearing fruit that is life-affirming and sustaining, both for us and for others, we step out of "this world" reality and step into the "kingdom of God that is in our midst." Rhetorical Question #2: What kind of fruit are you bearing in your life? Are you bearing fruit worthy of repentance?

This type of spiritual work seldom comes easy to us. We need something to motivate us to do the hard work of self-reflection, repentance and change. How did John motivate the crowds by the Jordan River? He talked about fire. Fire always gets our attention. Fire alarms. Fire drills. Sirens on fire trucks. Once on our farm while growing up, a hayfield near to the house caught fire. It wasn't a raging inferno, but it was burning dry stubble and moving toward the barns and house. My mom was the only one at home, but luckily a neighbor saw it, came over and got it under control. When we got off the school bus, we saw the charred outline on the ridge and knew just how close the flames had come to our house. That got our attention!

Amongst all this talk about the kingdom of God and repentance, John mentions fire several times. Trees bearing bad fruit are cut down and thrown into fire. Wheat is put in the granary, but dry, useless chaff is burnt with unquenchable fire. It's a powerful image; old-time ministers, quick to insist that flames of hell and destruction await all sinners, were known as "fire and brimstone" preachers. But fire is not just about destruction. Some forest fires are necessary parts of the cycles of life, burning off dry growth so new plants and green saplings can emerge in spring. Fires are used to purify and burn away what's unnecessary. Fires are used to cook, to warm our aching bones; it is something we gather around and, in the gathering, become a family.

Fire can be something holy, like Moses at the burning bush; a place where God drew near to earth, where the kingdom of God was truly near. Besides, if the one coming after John was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, how can fire simply be a tool of destruction? When the day of Pentecost came upon the early church, doesn't it say that those disciples, men and women, were blown upon by a strong wind, filled with the Holy Spirit so that they began to speak in other languages, and that tongues of fire, as it were, divided and rested upon them? (Acts 2:2-4) Doesn't it say that?

Rhetorical Question #1: What brought you to church today? What wind or spirit or pain or passion brought you here? Rhetorical Question #2: As you reflect on the nearness, the all-encompassing embrace of the kingdom of God, what fruit are you bearing in your life? Is it fruit worthy of, arising from, repentance? Rhetorical Question #3: What Godly fire has got your attention today? For all I know, for some of you today's fire is good old-fashioned fire and brimstone: Cut out what you're doing or you're heading for destruction. For some of you it might be a fire of purification, burning away the dross, the clutter, the demons and doubts and debris of your soul. For some it might be a fresh awareness of standing on holy ground, before a bush that burns without being consumed, as you prepare to heed God's call and step into a whole new chapter in your life. And for some it might be a fire of passion that is moving you out of, as Thoreau would say, your life of quiet desperation. Fire for change, for justice, for action. It is being touched by a Pentecost-flame, blown by the Holy Spirit, learning to walk by faith, not by sight – you know it when it hits you; now you just have to follow where it leads.

The crowd by the banks of the Jordan River and this congregation of East Liberty Presbyterian Church are both confronted by John the Baptist. His questions are shouted out loud: Why are you here? Are you bearing fruit worthy of repentance? What Godly fire has got your attention today?

In a few moments, we will celebrate communion – a meal of bread baked by fire and of wine as red as flames. It is a meal hosted by one who endured a cross of utter darkness that he might emerge victorious from a tomb like a blinding flash of light. It is a meal that forges us together as a family, as baptized, redeemed, forgiven, Prodigal Sons and Daughters, as if the communion table were really a blacksmith's forge. As you come forward today, think about fire. Think about Godly fire and where it touches you today. And as we commune, be listening to how God answers your three, rhetorical questions – for they are really not at all rhetorical. They are the key questions about life, this life, new life, and eternal life. And know that John is correct: The kingdom of heaven has come near. Thanks be to God!